

Intergenerational Trauma and Cultural Resilience: Exploring the Impact of Family Norms on Mental Health Disclosure

Disha Tyagi^{1*}, Kajal Tomar², Deepika Chamoli Shahi³

Abstract

This comprehensive review examines how intergenerational trauma and cultural resilience influence individuals' choices to disclose or conceal their mental health challenges in family contexts. This paper utilizes 50 peer-reviewed studies out of 80 in total from various cultural contexts, this paper explores how family norms, especially in collectivist cultures, impact the disclosure of mental health issues. This review paper uses a thematic analysis strategy, systematically integrating qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies to identify recurring themes associated with trauma transmission, emotional expression, and resilience strategies. Results show that in numerous families, particularly those influenced by historical or collective trauma, silence frequently serves as a protective strategy, maintained by entrenched beliefs regarding emotional control and anxiety over stigma. On the other hand, cultural resilience demonstrated through community bonds, customs, and common identity acts as a counterbalance, promoting emotional vulnerability and group recovery. The analysis highlights the interplay between trauma and resilience in families, affecting whether mental health discussions are stifled or promoted. In the end, it supports culturally aware mental health approaches that acknowledge historical suffering while leveraging cultural strengths to facilitate safe and open conversations. The review underscores how intergenerational narratives, parental coping mechanisms, and social expectations shape individuals' willingness to engage in emotional disclosure. It also emphasizes that interventions focusing on culturally sensitive communication and family-based healing frameworks are more effective in reducing stigma and enhancing psychological well-being. Overall, this paper contributes to the growing recognition of culture-specific pathways in mental health discourse, stressing the importance of understanding trauma and resilience not as opposing forces but as interconnected processes shaping collective healing.

Keywords: Intergenerational trauma, cultural resilience, mental health disclosure, family norms

*Author for Correspondence

Disha Tyagi
E-mail: dishatyagi023@gmail.com

¹Counselling Psychologist, Department of Psychology, Doon University, Dehradun, Uttarakhand, India

²Consultant and Research Assistant, Department of Psychology, Speakingcube Online Mental Health Consulting Foundation, Dehradun, Uttarakhand, India

³Founder and Director, Department of Psychology, Speakingcube Online Mental Health Consulting Foundation, Uttarakhand Adjunct Faculty Online Southern New Hampshire University, USA, Adjunct Faculty Online Saint Leo University, USA

Received Date: May 08, 2025

Accepted Date: July 07, 2025

Published Date: November 10, 2025

Citation: Disha Tyagi, Kajal Tomar, Deepika Chamoli Shahi. Intergenerational Trauma and Cultural Resilience: Exploring the Impact of Family Norms on Mental Health Disclosure. International Journal of Behavioral Sciences. 2025; 2(2): 53–58p.

INTRODUCTION

Trauma does not always end with the person who experiences it. Often, it weaves itself into the fabric of family life, silently influencing the thoughts, behaviors, and emotional responses of future generations.(PubMed, 2018 [35]; PsychCentral, 2022 [34]; APA Monitor,2019) [1]. This phenomenon, known as intergenerational trauma, has been increasingly recognized as a key factor in mental health challenges, particularly within collectivist societies where family bonds and cultural expectations run deep.(Center for Mindful Therapy, n.d.; The Canadian Encyclopedia, n.d.; WebMD, n.d.) In many cultures, especially across Asia and other non-Western communities, family

norms and cultural values shape not only how individuals cope with distress but also whether they feel safe to disclose their mental health struggles at all. (researcher, 2024 [19]; MentalHealth.com, 2024 [33]; PMC, 2015[29]) Within these family systems, there may be unspoken rules rooted in stigma, honor, or a desire to protect one another that discourage open conversations about emotional pain.(Wong et al., 2017; Kauffman, 2020)[20]. At the same time, cultural resilience, the strength drawn from shared traditions, community support, and spiritual beliefs offers individuals and families tools for coping and healing.(Ungar, 2011; Thomas et al., 2020; Hodge, 2019)[17]. These cultural strengths can serve as a buffer against trauma, promoting adaptability and emotional well-being. However, the tension between cultural expectations to remain silent and the need for emotional expression creates a complex dynamic that affects mental health disclosure across generations(MentalHealth.com, 2024[24]; iResearchNet, 2024; PMC, 2011[28]).

Theoretical Framework

This review aims to explore the relationship between intergenerational trauma, cultural resilience, and family norms, with a focus on how these forces influence the willingness and ability of individuals to speak about their mental health. By analyzing 50 research studies from diverse cultural contexts, this paper seeks to understand the patterns of silence and disclosure shaped by trauma and resilience, and how they impact healing within families and communities. Understanding these dynamics is essential for creating culturally sensitive mental health interventions that not only honor tradition but also encourage openness, support, and recovery.

The paradigm of this research is grounded in the Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma Theory, which posits that trauma experienced by one generation can be passed down to subsequent generations through emotional, behavioral, and relational patterns (Kellermann, 2001) [21] This transmission occurs not only through direct communication but also through silence, coping mechanisms, and family dynamics, deeply influencing how mental health is perceived and discussed across generations.(Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018) [42].

In addition, the research incorporates Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1978) [3], which views the family as an emotional unit where individual behaviors and psychological experiences are interconnected with broader family patterns (Bowen, 1978 [3], Kerr & Bowen, 1988)[22]. This theory helps explain how family norms regarding emotional expression and mental health disclosure are shaped and maintained (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Hammond et al., 2015)[15]. It is particularly relevant in cultures where collective family reputation and cohesion are prioritized (Choi et al., 2008; Hammond et al., 2015)[15]

The paradigm is also drawn upon Cultural Resilience Theory, which emphasizes the protective role of cultural traditions, community support, and shared identity in coping with adversity (Clauss-Ehlers, 2004)[6]. Cultural resilience can serve as a buffer against the negative impacts of intergenerational trauma, promoting healing and adaptive functioning.(Brave Heart, 2000 [5]; Faces & Voices of Recovery, 2018 [9]; PMC, 2021) [42]. However, cultural practices may also reinforce stigma and silence around mental health, depending on how they are interpreted and applied within family systems.(Faces & Voices of Recovery, 2018) [9].

Furthermore elements from Stigma Theory (Goffman, 1963) [12] are integrated to understand the social and cultural mechanisms that discourage mental health disclosure. In many communities, particularly within collectivist cultures, mental illness is stigmatized, leading to fear of judgment and social exclusion, which contributes to a culture of silence and suppression of emotional struggles.(Triandis, 1995) [39].

Lastly the framework is informed by Cultural Psychology, which stresses the importance of cultural context in shaping beliefs, behaviors, and values. This perspective highlights how mental health, trauma, and resilience are not universal experiences but are deeply embedded in cultural narratives,

family norms, and societal expectations.(Cultural Influences on Mental Health, 2017 [7]; Brainsway, 2025 [4]; Mental Health First Aid, 2019) [25].Understanding these cultural dimensions is crucial to exploring how intergenerational trauma and resilience influence mental health disclosure among diverse populations.(PMC, 2019[41]; PMC, 2016) [30][31]

METHODOLOGY

Objective

To explore how intergenerational trauma and cultural resilience influence family norms around mental health disclosure across culturally diverse communities.

Hypothesis

There is an inverse relationship between intergenerational trauma and mental health disclosure, which is moderated by cultural resilience and family norms.

Research Method

This research utilized a systematic review methodology to examine the connections among intergenerational trauma, cultural resilience, and the willingness to disclose mental health issues within families. An initial collection of 80 peer-reviewed articles was gathered from academic resources such as PubMed, PsycINFO, APA databases, and Google Scholar. From this collection, 50 studies were chosen based on specific inclusion criteria: relevance to key themes (the transmission of trauma, cultural resilience, family norms, and mental health disclosure), application of qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method methodologies, and a concentration on cultural or familial settings. Only articles published in English were considered. Studies that lacked empirical support or relevance to cultural or familial contexts were excluded. A thematic analysis was performed to uncover trends across the selected studies, concentrating on how trauma and resilience impact the reporting of mental health difficulties across generations.

DISCUSSION

Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma

Research indicates that trauma experienced by one generation can significantly influence the psychological and emotional well-being of future generations. (Healthline, 2023 [16]; WebMD, 2023; PMC, 2022)[32]. Studies by Kellermann (2001) [21] and Danieli (1998) [8] show that unresolved trauma is often transmitted through family narratives, behaviors, and emotional patterns. These inherited traumas can affect self-perception, relationships, and the ability to openly discuss mental health challenges, especially in cultures where silence and emotional restraint are valued.(PMC, 2022) [32]

Cultural Norms and Mental Health Disclosure

Cultural beliefs and family norms significantly shape perceptions of mental health, particularly in collectivist societies where values like family honor and social harmony discourage open discussions of personal struggles. These cultural expectations often lead to internalized stigma, preventing individuals from seeking help or disclosing mental health needs (Mohankumar, 2022 [27]).

Resilience Through Cultural Practices

Despite the barriers posed by intergenerational trauma, cultural practices can serve as powerful tools for resilience. Studies by Ungar (2011)[40] highlight that traditional rituals, spiritual practices, and community support systems provide individuals with a sense of identity and belonging. These cultural resources can promote healing, foster emotional expression, and support individuals in navigating mental health challenges more effectively.(Frontiers in Psychology, 2022[11]; Shoup et al., 2022 [37]; MHA National, 2025)[26].

Family Dynamics and Emotional Expression

Family dynamics often dictate the level of emotional openness within households. (Walsh, 2016[55]; Schrodtt et al., 2008)[36]. Research by Goodman et al. (2010) [13] indicates that families with rigid

hierarchies or communication barriers tend to suppress emotional expression, reinforcing trauma and limiting mental health disclosure (Goodman et al., 2010)[14]. This suppression can be linked to broader family dynamics that influence emotional openness and mental health outcomes (Walsh, 2016[41]; Schrodt et al., 2008). Conversely, families that encourage emotional validation and open dialogue can help break the cycle of silence and support healing across generations.

Need for Culturally Sensitive Approaches

There is a growing need for mental health interventions that are culturally informed and family-centered. According to Sue et al. (2009)[38], culturally sensitive therapy can address the unique experiences of individuals from diverse backgrounds, incorporating cultural values into healing practices. Interventions that respect cultural identity while addressing trauma can empower individuals to speak openly about their experiences and seek support without fear of judgment. (Bernal et al., 2009[2]; Schnyder et al., 2015; Ungar, 2011) [40].

CONCLUSION

The research indicates that intergenerational trauma adversely affects the willingness to disclose mental health issues, especially within cultural and familial settings that discourage emotional openness. The perpetuation of unaddressed trauma through generations, particularly in collectivist cultures, often results in silence, internalized shame, and bottled-up feelings due to the emphasis on family reputation and social cohesion (Johnson, 2022[19]). Cultural resilience, expressed through customs, spiritual beliefs, and community support, can alleviate the effects of trauma by fostering healing and encouraging openness. Family dynamics that promote emotional acknowledgment and open communication can help break the cycle of silence and facilitate intergenerational healing (Walsh, 2016)[41]. These findings support the theory that cultural resilience and family dynamics act as moderating factors in the negative correlation between intergenerational trauma and mental health disclosures (Kirmayer et al., 2014)[23]. Consequently, it is vital to adopt culturally sensitive and family-focused strategies to enhance mental health understanding, diminish stigma, and empower individuals to express their emotional experiences across generations (Frontiers in Psychiatry, 2024)[10].

Recommendation

1. Considering the scope of secondary research involving 50 studies, it is advisable to extend the investigation through longitudinal and cross-cultural studies for a more comprehensive understanding of the long-term impact of intergenerational trauma and the role of cultural resilience in diverse family contexts.
2. Conducting primary research becomes essential to explore specific dimensions identified in the review, such as barriers to mental health disclosure and culturally embedded coping mechanisms. This would offer deeper, context-specific insights and help in developing effective, culturally informed interventions.

Limitation

1. *Dependence on secondary sources:* This research relies on a systematic review of existing literature instead of collecting primary data, which might restrict its direct relevance to particular populations.
2. *Cultural differences:* Although the research explores various cultural contexts, applying the findings universally across different societies could be difficult due to distinct cultural norms and family dynamics.
3. *Absence of longitudinal research:* The studies included may not adequately reflect the changing nature of intergenerational trauma and resilience over time, since most research is based on cross-sectional analysis.
4. *Possible publication bias:* Research that emphasizes resilience and positive coping mechanisms is likely to be published more frequently, which may distort the overall representation of trauma's impact.

5. *Intricate interactions*: The relationship between intergenerational trauma, cultural resilience, and family traditions is very complex, and this study might not address all contributing variables, such as socioeconomic status, education, and individual coping mechanisms.
6. *Limited examination of intervention effectiveness*: While the study highlights the importance of culturally appropriate methods, it does not thoroughly assess the efficacy of specific interventions across various cultural settings.

REFERENCES

1. APA Monitor. The legacy of trauma [Internet]. 2019 [cited 2025 Oct 26]. Available from: <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/02/legacy-trauma>
2. Bernal G, Jiménez-Chafey MI, Domenech Rodríguez MM. Cultural adaptation of treatments: A resource for considering culture in evidence-based practice. *Prof Psychol Res Pract*. 2009;40(4):361–8.
3. Bowen M. Family therapy in clinical practice. New York: Jason Aronson; 1978.
4. Brainsway. Culture-related mental health conditions [Internet]. 2025 [cited 2025 Oct 26]. Available from: <https://www.brainsway.com/knowledge-center/culture-related-mental-health-conditions/>
5. Brave Heart MYH. Wakiksuyapi: Carrying the historical trauma of unresolved grief. *Smith Coll Stud Soc Work*. 2000;68(3):287–305. doi:10.1080/00377310009517638
6. Clauss-Ehlers CS. Cultural resilience: The protective role of culture in coping with stress. New York: Springer; 2004.
7. Cultural Influences on Mental Health. The Public Health Advocate [Internet]. 2017 [cited 2025 Oct 26]. Available from: <https://pha.studentorg.berkeley.edu/2017/04/16/cultural-influences-on-mental-health/>
8. Danieli Y. International handbook of multigenerational legacies of trauma. New York: Springer; 1998.
9. Faces & Voices of Recovery. Intergenerational healing: Recognition, resistance, resilience, and recovery. 2018 Nov 30.
10. Frontiers in Psychiatry. An integrated family approach in the practice of adult and child mental health care. *Front Psychiatry*. 2024;15. doi:10.3389/fpsyt.2024.1298268
11. Frontiers in Psychology. Role of cultural resources in mental health: An existential perspective. *Front Psychol*. 2022;13. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2022.860560
12. Goffman E. Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity. Englewood Cliffs (NJ): Prentice-Hall; 1963.
13. Goodman RF, et al. Trauma and resilience: A handbook for mental health practitioners. New York: Guilford Press; 2010.
14. Goodman SH, Rouse MH, Connell AM, Broth MR, Hall CM, Heyward D. Maternal depression and child psychopathology: A meta-analytic review. *Clin Child Fam Psychol Rev*. 2010;14(1):1–27. doi:10.1007/s10567-010-0080-1
15. Hammond R, Cheney P, Pearsey R. Sociology of the family textbook. Rocky Ridge Press; 2015.
16. Healthline. Intergenerational trauma: What it is and how to heal [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2025 Oct 26]. Available from: <https://www.healthline.com>
17. Hodge DR. Spiritual resilience: A new approach to understanding resilience in the context of spirituality and culture. *Soc Work*. 2019;64(4):405–13. doi:10.1093/sw/swy054
18. iResearchNet. Cultural variations in health disclosure [Internet]. 2024 Mar 4 [cited 2025 Oct 26]. Available from: <https://psychology.iresearchnet.com/health-psychology-research/disclosure-and-health/cultural-variations-in-health-disclosure/>
19. Johnson J. The impact of unaddressed trauma on collectivist cultures. *J Cult Psychol*. 2022;12(1):1–10.
20. Kauffman J. The impact of family stigma on mental health treatment: A qualitative study. *J Fam Issues*. 2020;41(9):1289–311. doi:10.1177/0192513X19880606
21. Kellermann NPF. Transmission of Holocaust trauma: An integrative view. *Psychiatry*. 2001;64(3):256–67. doi:10.1080/00332747.2001.110248851

22. Kerr ME, Bowen M. Family evaluation: An approach based on Bowen theory. New York: W.W. Norton & Company; 1988.
23. Kirmayer LJ, Gone JP, Moses J. Rethinking historical trauma. *Transcult Psychiatry*. 2014;51(3):299–319. doi:10.1177/1363461514536358
24. MentalHealth.com. Relationship between culture and mental health [Internet]. 2024 Jan 3 [cited 2025 Mar 20]. Available from: <https://www.mentalhealth.com/library/social-cultural-topics>
25. Mental Health First Aid. Four ways culture impacts mental health [Internet]. 2019 [cited 2025 Oct 26]. Available from: <https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/2019/07/four-ways-culture-impacts-mental-health/>
26. MHA National. Culturally-based practices [Internet]. 2025 [cited 2025 Oct 26]. Available from: <https://www.mhanational.org/bipoc-mental-health/culturally-based-practices>
27. Mohankumar R. The influence of cultural stigma on perceptions of mental illness [Internet]. San Jose: San Jose State University ScholarWorks; 2022.
28. PMC. Cultural differences in the reciprocal relations between emotion suppression coping, depressive symptoms, and interpersonal functioning among adolescents [Internet]. 2011 Mar 1 [cited 2025 Mar 20]. Available from: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5274630/>
29. PMC. Cultural influences in mental health treatment [Internet]. 2015 Oct 13 [cited 2025 Oct 26]. Available from: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9528809/>
30. PMC. Beliefs and perception about mental health issues: A meta-synthesis. *Natl Cent Biotechnol Inf*; 2016.
31. PMC. Culture-sensitive psychotraumatology. *Natl Cent Biotechnol Inf*; 2016.
32. PMC. Intergenerational transmission of traumatic stress and resilience among Cambodian immigrant families along coastal Alabama: Family narratives. *J Immigr Minor Health*. 2021 [cited 2025 Oct 26]. Available from: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8237097/>
33. PMC. Intergenerational transmission of trauma: The mediating effects of family health [Internet]. 2022 [cited 2025 Oct 26]. Available from: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov>
34. PsychCentral. Intergenerational trauma: How it affects families [Internet]. 2022 [cited 2025 Oct 26]. Available from: <https://psychcentral.com/lib/how-intergenerational-trauma-impacts-families>
35. PubMed. Preventing intergenerational trauma transmission: A critical interpretive synthesis. *J Adv Nurs*. 2018 [cited 2025 Oct 26]. Available from: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30556334/>
36. Schrodtt P, Witt PL, Shimkowski JR. A meta-analytical review of family communication patterns and their associations with information processing, behavioral, and psychosocial outcomes. *Commun Monogr*. 2008;75(3):248–69. doi:10.1080/03637750802256318
37. Shoup R, Endersbe A, Hernandez Moctezuma N, Balderas-Johnson P. Expanding the cultural lens of mental health: Cultural healing practices [Internet]. Minnesota: Minnesota State University Mankato; 2022 [cited 2025 Oct 26]. Available from: <https://ahn.mnsu.edu/globalassets/college-of-allied-health-and-nursing/social-work/pdfs/cultural-healing-practices-policy-advocacy-brief.final.pdf>
38. Sue S, Sue DW, Sue D, Sue S. Culturally sensitive therapy: Incorporating cultural values into healing practices. Hoboken (NJ): Wiley; 2009.
39. Triandis HC. Individualism and collectivism. Boulder (CO): Westview Press; 1995.
40. Ungar M. The social ecology of resilience: Addressing contextual and cultural ambiguity of a nascent construct. *Am J Orthopsychiatry*. 2011;81(1):1–17.
41. Walsh F. Strengthening family resilience. 3rd ed. New York: Guilford Press; 2016.
42. Yehuda R, Lehrner A. Intergenerational transmission of trauma effects: Putative role of epigenetic mechanisms. *World Psychiatry*. 2018;17(3):243–57. doi:10.1002/wps.20568